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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CAIRO 002968

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PHUM PGOV KPAO PREL EG

SUBJECT: EGYPTIAN JOURNALISTS SENTENCED TO PRISON TERMS FOR
DEFAMING MINISTER

Classified by ECPO Counselor John P. Desrocher for reasons
1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

1. (SBU) A Cairo Criminal Court has convicted three journalists working for independent daily Al Masry Al Youm of defaming Minister of Housing Ibrahim Soliman. The court sentenced the three defendants each to one year in jail and ordered them to pay fines of LE 10,000 (about \$1750). The sentences are a setback to press freedom. They will also draw further attention to the alleged corruption of Minister Soliman. End summary.

The Risks of Investigative Journalism in Egypt

2. (U) Al-Masry Al Youm reported in August 2004 that police had searched the offices of Minister of Housing, Utilities, and Urban Communities Dr. Mohamed Ibrahim Soliman during an apparent corruption investigation. Immediately thereafter, the Minister filed a complaint for defamation against journalists Abdel Nasser Ali, Youssef Al-Aoumi, and Alaa Yahya Mohamed El Ghatrify. The cabinet also issued a statement, which Al Masry Al Youm promptly published, denying that Soliman's office had been searched.

3. (SBU) The sentencing of the three journalists to jail time comes despite President Mubarak's announcement in February 2004 that he supported legislation that would bar courts from sentencing those convicted of defamation, or other publishing offenses, to jail. The Egyptian Parliament has yet to act on Mubarak's proposal. The journalists themselves, anticipating jail time, did not attend the sentencing. They are now fugitives. Their publisher, Hisham Kassem, told us that he had discussed the matter with Reporters Sans Frontieres and would continue to call attention to the case.

4. (U) In a press release issued on April 18, the Egyptian Organization for Human Rights (EOHR), the country's leading independent human rights group, termed the convictions and sentencing "yet another violation of freedom of thought and opinion." EOHR's press release flagged the failure of the GOE to implement President Mubarak's proposed scrapping of the law that allows for jail time for convictions in publishing cases. It said that the case is another reminder of the need to revise Egyptian legislation "to bring it in line with international instruments."

5. (SBU) On April 17 and 18, journalists staged a protest at the Cairo offices of the Press Syndicate. Several post press contacts suspect that the convicted trio made a "beginner's mistake" with their August 2004 report when they, and their editors, ran with a story for which they did not have independent proof. At the time, Al Masry Al Youm was just a few months old. Publisher Kassem, however, told us that "we stand by our story."

Minister Soliman's Reputation for Corruption

6. (SBU) Although Minister Soliman may be pleased with the prosecution and sentencing of the journalists, his name will likely be cropping up in the news regularly in the coming months. He has long been dogged by accusations of corruption and has pursued defamation charges against at least 16 journalists, according to an observer of Egypt's media scene.

7. (SBU) We understand that a court in Great Britain will begin hearing evidence in May regarding charges against renowned Egyptian construction engineer Mamdouh Hamza, who was arrested in London in July 2004, and whose firm played a key role in constructing the prize-winning Bibliotheca Alexandrina. Hamza allegedly conspired to have Soliman and several of his associates killed. According to rumors circulating in Cairo salons, Hamza's animus for Soliman was inspired in part by the Minister's unwillingness to award any construction bids to Hamza's firm.

18. (C) Soliman is widely believed to be corrupt, and has been a regular target of muckraking Egyptian journalists. Although he has a record of achievement with regard to developing Cairo's satellite cities, his many critics allege that he has enriched himself and his family--his brother-in-law runs a leading construction firm--with rigged bids. Minister Soliman is also known for his close connections to First Lady Suzanne Mubarak and presidential son Gamal, as well as presidential advisor Zakaria Azmy and Minister for People's Assembly Affairs Kamal El Shazly.

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